

Quarterly Report
BANGLADESH: STRENGTHENING COOPERATION
AMONG POLITICAL PARTIES IN PARLIAMENT
USAID Grant No. 388-A-00-99-00027-00
January 1 to March 31, 2000

I. SUMMARY

Following a November 1998 assessment mission to Bangladesh and in response to various requests by Bangladeshi political leaders, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), initiated a nine-month program in June 1999 to strengthen cooperation among Bangladeshi political parties in parliament. NDI has attempted to achieve this goal by: consulting directly with political party members to assist them in finding ways to work together and improving parliamentary functioning; encouraging civil society to become more involved in the political process; and assisting parliamentary staff improve the public image of parliament.

During this quarter, NDI: 1) consulted with leaders from the various political parties; 2) facilitated a student visit to parliament; 3) provided guidance to members of civil society on effective advocacy strategies; 4) encouraged committee chairmen and NGO representatives to work more closely together; 5) compiled and distributed to the Bangladeshi participants of the parliamentary study trip to Australia the conclusions from NDI's political party workshops; and 6) held a World Affairs Briefing for members of the Washington community. As a result of NDI's activities, the political and civic leaders have begun taking important steps that, if continued, could improve political functioning in Bangladesh.

II. BACKGROUND

Since 1991, when Bangladesh held multiparty elections that were broadly accepted by the political parties, Bangladeshis have worked to develop an independent legislature that is effective and accountable. Unfortunately, a legacy of mistrust between the major political parties continues to plague Bangladeshi politics. Parliamentary boycotts and street demonstrations led by all parties greatly limit the effectiveness of the country's governing institutions. Recently, opposition parties called for the government to resign immediately and hold early elections. Regular impasses among the parties and weak governing institutions threaten Bangladesh's democratic development. Future development depends on concrete legislative reforms and an increase in citizen involvement in the political process.

Building on previous initiatives, NDI's current program seeks to strengthen cooperation among Bangladeshi political parties in parliament by accomplishing the following objectives:

- Create the necessary space for dialogue among political leaders to discuss ways to resolve problems in the legislatures; and
- Increase the fairness and efficiency of parliamentary procedures at the plenary and committee levels.

In July 1999, the Institute re-opened an office in Dhaka and began conducting activities designed to increase citizen input into the legislative process and promote parliamentary reform and inter-party dialogue. NDI held a workshop for Bangladeshi civic leaders in September 1999 to discuss effective advocacy strategies. Following the workshop discussion, participants organized a group meeting on how they could bring an end to the current political deadlock between the parties. In addition, in November 1999, NDI held a workshop on the role civil society can play in the work of parliamentary committees. The workshop brought together committee chairmen and representatives from local NGOs and the media to share ideas about how civil society could assist parliamentary committees write laws that better address the needs of the Bangladeshi citizenry. The Institute has already seen a few NGOs begin to work more closely with committee members.

Also during this program, the Institute conducted activities to assist Bangladeshi political leaders to increase cooperation among the political parties and improve parliamentary functioning. NDI organized four workshops on the functioning of the major parliamentary parties. During the workshops, NDI representatives discussed with party members ways to improve parliamentary procedures. With funds from another grantee, NDI brought a Bangladeshi delegation of parliamentary leaders representing the major political parties and civil society representatives to Australia to study the democratic traditions of the Australian parliamentary system. The trip increased the Bangladeshi leaders' understanding of democratic structures within political parties and the legislature. The trip also provided the Bangladeshis with an opportunity to discuss, in a neutral setting, ways to improve cooperation between the political parties. During the trip, the Australian political leaders, former NDI trainers in Bangladesh, presented the delegates with a number of recommendations that would improve the parliamentary process in Bangladesh.

In previous quarters, NDI encouraged Bangladeshi officials to establish a Citizens' Relations Office (CRO) in parliament. The Office would educate citizens, especially young Bangladeshis, about the functions and importance of a democratic government by organizing guided tours of the parliament building for students and other civic groups, and publishing leaflets that explain in simple language issues related to democratic governance. In addition, the office would encourage discussions about democracy and governance in schools and other social settings as well as provide advisory services to members of parliament on issues related to enhancing popular understanding of the role and function of a democratic government. The speaker of parliament has agreed to take the necessary steps to establish this office. While conducting future activities, NDI hopes to build upon these efforts.

Without a guarantee of future funding and upon the conclusion of the field representative's contract, NDI closed the Institute's office in Bangladesh. NDI is now preparing to submit a request for a cost extension to its current program to continue efforts to strengthen democratic practices in Bangladesh.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

During this quarter, NDI: 1) consulted with leaders from the various political parties; 2) facilitated a student visit to parliament; 3) provided guidance to members of civil society on effective advocacy strategies; 4) encouraged committee chairmen and NGO representatives to work more closely together; 5) compiled the conclusions from NDI's political party workshops; and 6) held a World Affairs Briefing for members of the Washington community.

Consulting with Leaders from the Various Political Parties

NDI's field representative in Bangladesh met with political party members, government officials and civic leaders to offer advice on what steps they could take to promote cooperation among the parties and to strengthen the legislature, including: the prime minister; the opposition leader; the speaker and deputy speaker of parliament; the party whips; committee chairmen; and many other members of parliament from the various political parties.

During the meetings, NDI's field representative offered suggestions on how the individuals could participate in increasing cooperation between the ruling and opposition parties. For instance, the field representative made suggestions to Bangladesh Nationalist Party members on how they could build a winning party strategy, make concessions to the ruling party and simultaneously maintain strong public support. The field representative also made suggestions to Awami party members on how they could make parliamentary proceedings fairer and effectively reach out to the opposition parties.

Facilitating a Student Visit to the Parliament

On January 17, NDI facilitated the first visit initiated by the Bangladeshi public of 28 students and volunteers from the Free Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) to the parliament building. The group watched plenary proceedings and visited the parliamentary library and two committee hearing rooms. The group also ate lunch at the parliament house and listened to presentations by members of parliament from the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The visitors asked many questions of the speakers and expressed interest in learning about the day-to-day activities of the members.

Providing Guidance to Members of Civil Society on Effective Advocacy Strategies

Building upon previous activities, NDI continued to meet with civil society leaders to discuss ways of developing effective political advocacy strategies that would pressure members of the various political parties to work together within parliament. One of the meetings took place with a representative from the Free Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA). As a result of this meeting, FEMA organized a group of 15 civic representatives to discuss steps on how to advocate for political reform. A local paper printed an article about this meeting. (See attached Press Clip.)

Consulting with Committee Chairman and NGO Representatives on Ways to Increase Cooperation Between Them

NDI continued holding joint meetings with women representatives and the chairman of the Committee on Women and Children's Rights. Following the discussions, the committee chairman promised to invite the women to brief committee members on their work and research findings. The chairman hopes to include the topics discussed during their meeting on committee meeting agendas.

Compiling the Conclusions from the Political Party Workshops

NDI compiled the conclusions from the four workshops the Institute held with members from the various political parties. The findings contain recommendations for ways to improve parliamentary procedures to promote increased coordination between the political parties. Some suggestions include: 1) improving the quality and media coverage of parliamentary proceedings; 2) strengthening the relationship between the parliament and the public; 3) strengthening the role of the speaker as impartial overseer of parliamentary proceedings; and 4) building an inclusive parliament where the opposition and governing parties share responsibilities and functions in the plenary and in committees. During a parliamentary study trip to Australia, the Australian political leaders, former NDI trainers in Bangladesh, presented the Bangladeshi participants with these workshop conclusions. (The document is now being refined and will be included in the final report.)

Holding a World Affairs Briefing for Members of the Washington Community

In late March, the Institute prepared to host a World Affairs Briefing in Washington, D.C. on April 1. The Institute invited members of the Washington community, including representatives from the International Foundation for Election Systems, USAID, the Department of State, The Asia Foundation, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Bangladesh embassy and other representatives of the diplomatic corps. The field representative planned to provide an in-depth analysis of the causes for the political difficulties in Bangladesh, offer suggestions for strengthening democratic governance, and discuss NDI activities in the country.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Objectives: Create the necessary space for dialogue among political leaders to discuss ways to resolve problems in the legislatures.

Increase the fairness and efficiency of parliamentary procedures at the plenary and committee levels.

- Some members of the major political parties are now discussing ways to reform the political process. These members are searching for opportunities to press for reforms within their parties and the legislature.
- Civil society leaders initiated one of the first public tours of the parliament building. Working together, representatives of two major political parties responded to the visitors' concerns.
- Following an NDI-sponsored meeting between female NGO representatives and the chairman of the Committee on Women and Children's Right, the chairman invited the group to brief committee members on their work and research findings. These women are now sharing information with the committee, helping to inform its decisions.
- As a result of an NDI-sponsored meeting on advocacy strategy for NGO representatives, the Free Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) organized a group of 15 civic representatives to outline steps the group could take to advocate for political reform. FEMA is now working with other civic groups to promote joint advocacy efforts for political reform and has made formal suggestions on ways to structure the electoral process.

V. EVALUATION

NDI has successfully laid the groundwork that could lead to political reform in Bangladesh. The Institute's program has received considerable support from many Bangladesh political leaders and civil society representatives. The Institute has built close relationships with key players in Bangladesh's political system and many politicians are increasingly open to discussing contentious issues with NDI representatives and considering the Institute's recommendations for improving the political situation. Some members of the major political parties are now discussing ways to reform the political process and searching for opportunities to pressure their party members.

In addition, as a result of NDI's efforts, Bangladeshi civic groups have initiated discussions and activities on how they can become further involved in the political process and pressure members of parliament to improve parliamentary functioning. Furthermore, some civic groups and committee members have begun working more closely together and sharing information.

Due to NDI's efforts in facilitating a citizen-initiated tour of the parliament building, the legislature opened its doors to the public for the first time, and members of two major political parties worked together to field questions from the participants. NDI believes such tours will help improve the reputation of the parliament and its members, contribute to greater openness in parliamentary activity, and encourage members to listen to citizen demands.

The political and civic leaders have begun taking important steps that, if continued, could improve political functioning in Bangladesh. By following up on these efforts, and encouraging further reforms, NDI is playing a key role in providing assistance to Bangladeshis as they work to strengthen their democratic institutions.

VII. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

The Institute is preparing to submit a request for a cost extension to continue efforts to strengthen democratic governance in Bangladesh.